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# Recensions / Book Reviews

BAZIN, Eric, Charles, Gabriel, Hervé, and Jean-Francois
2008 *Étienne Bazin, Oblat de Marie Immaculée: Pionnier des Missions en Pays Inuit*, Dijon, Editions Clea, 89, Foreword by Bernard Saladin d'Anglure, 255 pages.[1]

The ways of life of the Inuit have always fascinated people around the world. Christian missionaries who went to live and work among them have likewise fascinated people, in particular in their home countries. That is why the relatives of the French Oblate Father Étienne Bazin (1903-1972) issued a little booklet in 1974 that contained the letters from their "uncle Étienne" about his missionary work among the Inuit: *Les letters d'Oncle Etienne*.

The present book, a biography of Bazin illustrated with numerous unique historic photos, may be seen as a sequel to the family booklet. This book (only available in French) is also largely based on Bazin's letters, but personal recollections and historical and anthropological studies are used to provide us with a fuller portrait of his life and work. His personality, childhood, education, religious devotion, and work are elaborated upon. His missionary work is placed within its historical context, as attention is paid to aspects of the culture of the Iglulingmiut, the people he came to live with in the 1930s and whose culture his work in turn would affect. A critical assessment of Christianity's position in present-day Inuit culture completes the book and reveals that we are not dealing with some sort of hagiography. Despite some clear admiration for their uncle's work, the book originated far more from the uniqueness of his life and the significance of his missionary work than from a wish to make a saint of him. The authors, five of his nephews, have not written a scholarly work; there is, for instance, no theoretical content whatsoever and the sources of the quotes from his letters are nowhere specified. But the book is nevertheless of relevance to scholars interested in (Canadian) Arctic history and in the practice and history of Christian missions.

The book informs us about Bazin's family, his early childhood years, his education, and his vocation, which he embarked on in 1921. Convinced—with support from his parents—that becoming a priest was to be his life goal, he wanted to join the Order of the Oblate Fathers or "Oblates of Mary Immaculate" (O.M.I.). This missionary order was founded in 1816 and "specialised" in what Pope Pius XI in 1938 called "difficult missions." After years of study and taking the vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity, Bazin, not a brilliant student but highly devoted and motivated,

[1] An earlier version of this review was first published in *H-France Review*, 10(62) (http://www.h-france.net/vol10reviews/vol10no62rasing.pdf).

was ordained on January 25, 1929. He was ordered to join the Oblates' Hudson's Bay Vicariate in March of that year and arrived on September 2, 1929 in Pond Inlet. The story of Bazin's life illustrates the strictness of the Oblate Order. In March 1948, he was ordered to leave his mission right away with no time to say goodbye to his flock. He returned to France and became a priest for the parish of Corgoloin (Burgundy), where he stayed until his death in 1972. Unfortunately, we do not learn *why* Bazin had to leave his mission; all we get are some hints at monetary issues relating to his involvement in Inuit trading.

Bazin's mission of almost 30 years in the Canadian north (from 1929 to 1948, with the year 1946-1947 spent in France) consisted of preaching God's word to the Inuit of Pond Inlet (1929-1931), Repulse Bay (1945-1946), and Igloolik (1931-1948). The last mission originated entirely from Bazin's initiative. He alone decided to move to the Igloolik area in northern Foxe Basin to establish a church there. His superior, Mgr. Turquetil, could do nothing but approve the mission when he learned about it, several years after it had been established. Obviously, this was not in line with Oblate mission regulations but very much in line with Étienne Bazin's zeal and character.

This book gives us a detailed and fine inside view of the missionary work, the difficulties missionaries encountered, the presence of shamans representing the old spiritual or religious views, the creation of new Catholic missions, the rivalry with the Anglicans, the relationships with other Whites in the north (traders, policemen), and the problems of travelling and communicating with others within the vicariate and/or the outside world. Crucial are Bazin's views on the Inuit culture of the 1930s and 1940s, which, as time would tell, stood on the verge of an entirely new era. Bazin's decision to settle in the Foxe Basin area because he felt that more souls could be won there than in Pond Inlet (where the Anglican mission was more "successful") was timely and significant. He arrived 10 years after a crude form of Anglican Christianity had been introduced to the Inuit of the region by Umiq and his son Nuqallaq. Umiq presented himself as a reincarnation of God and his son as a reincarnation of Jesus, obviously inspired by the Anglican missionaries who had been bringing the word of God to the Inuit of south, east, and north Baffin Island in the preceding decades. They had a copy of a Bible in the syllabic writing that the Anglican missionaries had developed. The two men were also on the run after Nuqallaq had killed the free trader Robert Janes in 1920 on North Baffin Island. At the same time, other Inuit families in the Igloolik area had picked up Catholic prayers and songs through contacts with people or relatives to the south, where the Oblate Fathers had meanwhile established missions in Repulse Bay, Coral Harbour, and Chesterfield Inlet. In May 1930, Bazin met one of these families, who had come to Pond Inlet to trade. Shortly afterwards, he decided to go to the Igloolik area because he was convinced that they were ready for the Catholic faith.[2]

But Bazin had to wait another year for a good opportunity to travel. On May 12, 1931, he left Pond Inlet by dog team and arrived in Igloolik on June 29, the first white man who had ever come to reside there. He settled on the neighbouring island of

2 The Inuit had developed a new ritual, "*siqqituq*," whereby they cast off their old spiritual worldview for Christianity; the quintessence of this ritual was the formal breaking of old taboos (Laugrand 2002: 447).

Avvajjaq, living in a tent and later in a *qarmaq*, a semi-subterranean home of stone, mud, and whalebone that the Inuit lived in during the fall. All the requisites for mass were kept in a small suitcase. Bazin's life was simple and hard. The letters from this period are a stunning and fascinating read. He was all alone most of the time because the Inuit roamed the region, hunting for survival. Bazin spent most of his time fishing and hunting—although he also received food from Inuit families—and visited the Inuit in their camps to assist them in whatever way he could (often providing basic medical care) and to bring God's word. Slowly but steadily, Bazin baptised more and more Inuit. They came to bear Christian names, usually the names of his relatives (Émile, Hervé, François, Louise, Rose…). On July 25, 1933, however, his house-chapel burnt to the ground, the fire being accidentally set by a candle. Bazin was left destitute, with nothing more than the clothes he was wearing, three consecrated hosts, a book of prayers, and a picture of Guy de Fontgalland, his personal guide through life, which had miraculously survived the blaze. The next day, Inuit who had seen the clouds of smoke some 15 km away came to his rescue. Bazin wrote a letter to Mgr Turquetil, Bishop of the Hudson's Bay Vicariate, informing him of his ordeal, but instead of complaining he asked God to forgive him and to "save the Inuit." His faith and his determination to succeed were not shaken. Deeply rooted in his vocation and his own Catholic upbringing in rural France, he was convinced of the righteousness of his mission.[3] In late August, he returned to Avvajjaq, built himself a new house-annex-chapel from stones, crates, driftwood, lumps of peat, and a walrus skin as a roof and resumed his hunting, fishing, and preaching life. In 1934, three years after its establishment, Mgr. Turquetil, approved Bazin's mission, officially naming it "Saint-Étienne."

In 1937, Bazin moved to Igloolik Island. Here, a new post was built from wood delivered by the O.M.I. ship M.F. Thérèse. The mission, near the shore of the island's horseshoe-shaped bay, would become the start of a new and permanent settlement: Igloolik, which in 2009 had over 1,500 inhabitants. Not all are Catholic, though. In 1959, an Anglican Inuk minister settled in Igloolik. As the head of a large extended family, he was a powerful, successful, and strong leader in the growing community. With the many changes that the shift from a nomadic to a sedentary life implied, including the end of pure subsistence hunting, the replacement of Inuit socialisation by formal education, the introduction of a cash economy, wage labour, and new means of travel (snowmobiles, airplanes) and communication (radio, television, computers), which all contributed to a fundamental transformation of values and norms, the animosity between Anglicans and Catholics in Igloolik did little to help people through the transitional decades of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.[4] By that time Bazin had already left the north and was spending his remaining years in France.

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3 Understanding the life and work of Bazin illustrates what Mills (1959: 6) saw as the "task and promise" of social analysis, i.e., "to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two in society." Biographical aspects must be related to specific historical aspects of Inuit culture to reach an adequate sociological understanding of the nature and importance of Bazin's missionary work.

4 The tensions between the two denominations eased in the course of the 1980s. See Rasing (1994) for detailed analysis of these processes of change. See also Damas (2002).

Some young, critical Inuit blame the missionaries for their role in affecting Inuit culture and bringing about the current social, economic, and psychological malaise of Inuit society, as seen in high rates of school drop-out, widespread unemployment, large-scale dependency on welfare payments and other income support, drug and alcohol abuse, overrepresentation of Inuit in crime –statistics, and alarming numbers of suicides. Obviously, missionaries like Bazin played a major role in such processes, but this book amply demonstrates that these are unintended consequences of missionary work. It also reveals that traders, missionaries, and policemen were instrumental in bringing about change, but were not allies in doing so; there was no front of Western influences attacking Inuit culture as is sometimes suggested (*cf.* Brody 1975). This book, in fact, illustrates the recent seminal study by Laugrand (2002) of missionary work among the Inuit in the Canadian Arctic, which finds that many Inuit were receptive to Christianity rather than opposed. The present book (and Laugrand's) should be made available in an English translation to provide a wider audience with a more realistic picture of missionary activity and its impact on modern Inuit culture.

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